DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 199 694 CS 206 034

AUTHOR Lide, Francis
TITLE Sentence Combining and Error Reduction.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (70th, Cincinnati, OH, November 21-26, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Error Analysis (Language); Higher Education; Remedial Instruction; *Sentence Combining; *Syntax; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Based on the assumption that major sentence errors are caused by a deficit in syntactic fluency that can be aided by sentence combining instruction, student writing errors are analyzed in this paper and explanations are provided showing how these errors could have been prevented or reduced through instruction in sentence combining. Some types of errors and examples of sentence combining corrections discussed are (1) faulty coordination of sentence parts that can be remedied by using prepositions to embed sentences, and (2) comma splices that can be eliminated by using dependent clauses. (MKH)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Francis Lide
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED199694

# SENTENCE COMBINING AND ERROR REDUCTION

by Francis Lide

In a paper delivered in 1979, Elray Pedersen states that a decade of research and practice has proved beyond much fear of contradiction that sentence combining can significantly improve the syntactic fluency of student writers. An important subject for further research in the 1980's, he says, "is whether sentence-combining practice actually improves the grammatical fluency of student writing." Pedersen defines grammatical fluency as structurally and morphologically correct writing relatively free from errors and stylistic flaws. It is not surprising that the effect of sentence combining on student error still remains to be thoroughly researched, for sentence combining has--rightly--never been primarily concerned with error, but with mature sentence structure and overall writing quality. It is not unlikely, of course, that one of the factors in the superior overall quality of the experimental groups in the various controlled experiments on sentence combining was an --as yet unmeasured--reduction in the sericusness and frequency of error.

The literature on the relationship between sentence combining and error is meager indeed. In a non-control-group study with ninth graders reported in 1976, Edgar Schuster found 22% fewer spelling errors after forty-five hours of

CS206035

sentence-combining instruction using Frank O'Hare's text Sentencecraft. These results are not surprising because, as Schuster notes, sentence combining involves "the copying of correctly spelled words," and because students inscribe far more words on paper in sentence combining than they do in traditional instruction. Schuster also reported 34% fewer fragments and 15% fewer run-ons in his posttest.

In an article published in 1978, Maimon and Nodine concluded on the basis of a very limited study that instruction in sentence combining is likely to lead initially to an increase in errors related to sentence embedding. When student writers start using more participial phrases and relative clauses, there will be an initial increase in dangling participles and misplaced modifiers. In other words, according to Maimon and Nodine, the writing of students engaged in sentence combining is likely to get worse before it gets better. Maimon and Nodine based their study on fifteen to twenty minutes of sentence combining per week for nine weeks using older materials of the first and second generations. I am not so sure that their conclusion still holds true when sentence-combining materials of the present third generation are used intensively by experienced teachers. After all, most errors connected with specific embedding operations are predictable, and with sufficient volume of sentence-combining practice we can teach to these errors and quickly bring them under control.

In the absence of a full-scale experimental study on the relationship between sentence combining and grammatical fluency, I would like to approach the problem using the methods of error analysis. I would like to analyze a number of student errors and then explain how these errors could have been prevented or reduced in frequency through instruction in sentence combining. (Unfortunately, time will not permit me to discuss more than about fifteen of the fifty odd examples in my collection. It will be my thesis throughout that many major sentence errors cannot be understood adequately on the surface level of punctuation, but must be attacked at their root cause--a deficit in syntactic fluency in relation to the writing task. By increasing syntactic fluency, sentence combining therefore gets at major sentence errors at their underlying causes but--and here is the beauty of it--without harping on errors explicitly.

The exception to my assertion that sentence errors reflect underlying problems of sentence structure is the sentence fragment. Most fragments I have seen in student writing are nothing more than mispunctuated final free modifiers. They are subordinate clauses, relative clauses, appositives, and absolutes that should have been attached to the previous sentence. Take the following example:

> But even these subjects are caught up in ominous [odious?] red tape. Red tape that costs this citizen tax dollars.

[Correct on screen.] This fragment is simply a mispunctuated final appositive.

Or take the following passage about our especially remote portion of Michigan's Upper Peninsula:

> On the whole the area is a good place to live. The main drawback being the distance one must travel to reach it.

In this case, we are dealing with a mispunctuated final absolute that should have been written thus:

> On the whole the area is a good place to live, the main drawback being the distance one must travel to reach it.

Almost any sentence-combining instruction is bound to generate a large volume of final free modifiers, and the college sentence-combining text The Writer's Options by Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg devotes three separate chapters to relative clauses, appositives, and absolutes. The customary punctuation of these structures can easily be pointed out when they are generated in the course of sentence-combining instruction.

One error especially common among college-level remedial students is not mentioned in many handbooks. The Little, Brown Handbook does include it, however, under the label faulty coordination. Let's examine a few cases of it:

Jim was a tall, lanky boy and had a habit of drooling.

In transformational terms, this error represents the omission of a required transformation. The writer has given us a

compound predicate when he should have written a relative clause or prepositional phrase:

> Jim was a tall, lanky boy who had a habit of drooling.

Or:

> Jim was a tall, lanky boy with a habit of drooling.

The preposition with is an extremely useful device for embedding a kernel sentence of the pattern he had into another sentence, but one rarely sees it in this function in student writing. Prepositional phrases lend themselves to sentence-combining instruction, however, and The Writer's Options contains an entire unit dealing with them.

Or take this sentence about a book on the sinking of the ore carrier Edmund Fitzgerald in Lake Superior in 1975:

> The Singing of the Sirens that Sunk [sic] the Fitz was written by Paul Hainault and it encompasses the entire story plus theories regarding the sinking.

The underlying cause of this case of faulty coordination is the student's habit of composing in disconnected kernel sentences:

> Kernel 1: The book was written by Paul Hainault.
> Kernel 2: The book encompasses the entire story.
> Kernel 3: The book encompasses theories regarding the sinking.

Sentence-combining practice in composing in longer and more inclusive word strings can be expected to help eliminate this type of error.

We all know that the standard description for a comma splice is the use of a comma instead of a period or semicolon to join two independent clauses without a coordinating conjunction. But from the point of view of error analysis, the striking thing about the comma splice is that it crops up so regularly in immature, uncombined sentences as a connective between independent clauses, each containing only one or two pieces of information. Consider the following example:

> Two library papers were due during one semester, these were merely regurgitations of information we had read.

Note here the typical pattern of demonstrative or personal pronoun plus verb <u>to be</u> immediately following the comma: <u>these were</u>, <u>this was</u>, <u>he was</u>, etcetera. This pattern is a tipoff that the information about to be added in a second independent clause should have been incorporated differently. What is needed in these cases is not a change in punctuation nor the addition of a coordinating conjunction, but sentence-combining operations that--as I will go on to illustrate--make the linkage with a relative pronoun, or convert the second independent clause into an appositive or absolute, or incorporate the second clause into the first by means of embedding operations. To illustrate, embedding is what should have happened in the example on the screen:

> The two library papers due during one semester were merely regurgitations of information we had read.

Here is another example of a comma splice in a highly uncombined passage. The student is describing her previous quarter's work in freshman composition:

> We spent a few days on the writing process. We learned how to gather ideas and organize them, this was usually done through shotgun writings.

Note again the telltale this was immediately after the comma. If the student had written "We learned how to gather ideas and organize them, and this was usually done through shotgun writings," she would have produced a case of faulty coordination. A semicolon is obviously inappropriate, and the writer did not want to use a period and thereby write her third consecutive short sentence. With no other options at her command, or at least without the courage to write them for her teacher's scrutiny, the student was, as it were, boxed in to a comma splice. Here as elsewhere, however, the problem is not the comma but what is to the left or the right of it. If the words [strike on transparency] this was . . . done are struck, the comma suddenly becomes appropriate, and we have a main clause followed by a very nice nonrestrictive adverbial prepositional phrase:

> We learned how to gather ideas and organize them, usually through shotgun writings.

In transformational terms, this particular comma splice is the result of the failure to make a reduction transformation, a common and much-repeated operation in all sentence combining.

The underlying cause of some comma splices can be in the choice of simple coordination as opposed to a more complex correlative linkage, as in the following student-authored passage on the original constitutional convention:

> The Articles of Confederation were failing miserably to provide tax dollars, a complete overhaul must have been on everyone's mind.

Here the problem is not at the clause juncture, but five words to the left and one word to the right:

> The Articles of Confederation were failing so miserably to provide tax dollars that a complete overhaul must have been on everyone's mind.

When used together, so . . . that are called correlative subordinating conjunctions. It is a linkage that can easily be targeted in sentence-combining exercises. This student's error, incidentally, could be analyzed as resulting from the apparently widespread habit of composing in one isolated independent clause at a time. The opposite habit, that of connecting clauses in the act of formulation and inscription, is practiced extensively in sentence combining.

Many comma splices are caused by a failure to use subordinate clauses, as in this example:

> It all started one Monday morning, I thought I knew my school schedule well enough to leave it at home.

This sentence, significantly, is the product of a remedial student who consistently composed in short, uncombined sentences.

What the student had in his ear but was unable to execute is the standard story opening, it all started when:

> It all started one Monday morning when I thought I knew my school schedule well enough to leave it at home.

Other comma splices result from failed introductory dependent clauses, such as the following example from a research paper on a trial:

> She [a defendant] was cross examined by Assistant U.S. Attorney Richard Yanko, who pressed her with many accusing questions, she appeared calm while answering his questions.

Note, by the way, how wordy and uncombined this example is in general, a symptom of which is the careless repetition of the word "questions." As for the comma splice, the problem lies not at the comma itself, but at what should have been the first word in the sentence--a when:

> When she was cross examined by Assistant U.S. Attorney Richard Yanko, who pressed her with many accusing questions, she appeared calm in her answers.

It is not unlikely that when the writer came to the point where she made the comma splice eighteen words into her sentence, she thought she had been writing a subordinate clause all along. As Mina Shaughnessy has noted, such lack of memory for what is to the left of the writing hand is very common among inexperienced writers.

For the last two errors cited, sentence combining could be a preventive in a number of ways. Single-sentence exercises cued for subordinating conjunctions--such as those in Frank O'Hare's text Sentencecraft--can accustom sentences to using subordinating conjunctions in introductory dependent clauses. Uncued whole-discourse exercises covering one or more paragraphs are also bound to generate a great many subordinate clauses along with other structures. But more importantly, all work in sentence combining exercises and [redacted] stretches the short-term syntactic memory, the ability to formulate a long word string and hold it in suspension until it is put down on paper.

With still other comma splices, the student should have written a nonrestrictive relative clause, as in the following example:

> The research paper was the main objective of the course, it took the entire quarter to complete it.

The most obvious revision would be:

> The research paper, which took the entire quarter to complete, was the main objective of the course.

But such highly parenthetical relative clauses are rare in most student writing, especially when they are inserted between the subject and verb of the main clause. The ability to break into sentences and add information, as Shaughnessy has pointed out, is a skill that basic writers lack and even less basic writers possess to a far too rudimentary degree. It is, however, a skill that is addressed specifically in most sentence-combining textbooks.

Failure to use a relative clause plus preposition when the context calls for it underlies the following comma splice:

> The textbook in my Engineering Communication in Designs course had a total of 950 pages, of those we covered approximately 150 to 175.

Since the student's topic is the high price of long and fractionally used textbooks, the point could have been made more effectively with a short,punchy followup sentence. (In meaningful sentence combining, one always holds open the option not to combine.) But the example contains an error because of the of those instead of an of which, which was probably in the writer's ear.

But let's leave the comma splice behind us. Uncertain control of the relative pronoun plus preposition can be responsible for clumsy sentences, garbled syntax, and poor transition. Take the following example:

> The final makeup of the jury was 9 women, two were black, and 3 men.

Of course the problem here could also have been solved with a pair of dashes or parentheses. But the awkwardness would not have occurred if the writer had been fluent in the of whom construction:

> The final makeup of the jury was three men and nine women, two of whom were black.

A deficient command of the relative pronoun plus preposition is also the source of this case of garbled syntax:

> That alone is the base that a couple embarks into marriage.

What the student meant to say was:

> That alone is the basis <u>on which</u> a couple embarks into marriage.

The relative pronoun plus preposition is so unfamiliar that when students do attempt it they fall into errors of redundancy such as the following:

> Dioxin is a byproduct of trichlorophenol, the substance from which 2,4,5-T is made from.

Such errors crop up when students use a written-language construction so unfamiliar to them that its grammar has been imperfectly internalized.

As their name implies, relative clauses relate; the relative pronoun plus preposition is an important transition device. Failure to use it can lead to poor transition and lack of clarity, as in the following passage in which two criminal cases are being compared:

> Another similarity was the prosecution's failure to present all information that could be used for [exculpatory] evidence. In the nurses' case, the prosecution withheld evidence gained while interviewing witnesses. The same occurred in the Reilly case. Seven police statements and eleven pieces of evidence had been withheld from the defense.

Not only does the last sentence lack transition; it is unclear in which case the eleven pieces of evidence were withheld. What is needed is an <u>in which</u> linkage after "the Reilly case." [Demonstrate on overhead.]

All speakers of the language possess syntactic fluency in the simpler forms of the relative clause. But as we have seen from the examples just cited, there is a need for sentence-combining materials targeted toward the relative clause in its more formal registers and elaborated forms, forms which educated speech and the standard written language rely on so heavily.

Unfortunately, time does not permit me to cite seven examples of errors and stylistic flaws that I analyze as misguided attempts to transfer spoken-language syntax to paper. In present-day American English, the syntax of the vernacular seems to be diverging so sharply from that of the standard written language that there is a need for sentence combining to accustom students to composing in written syntax.

Let me state in conclusion that in my view the purpose of error analysis is not to pounce on students for making errors, but to discover the underlying causes of these errors and to find ways--indirect and humane ways--to reduce them. As I hope to have demonstrated, sentence combining is such a way.